Beware of Boldness

CONRAD C. CRANE

At a counterterrorism conference in September 2004, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard B. Myers stated that the key question senior officials needed to ask about their conduct of the Global War on Terrorism was, "Are we being as bold and innovative as we need to be?"[1] Army Field Manual 7.0, *Training the Force*, states that the goals of operational deployments and major training opportunities are to enhance unit readiness and "produce bold, innovative leaders."[2] These adjectives have now become accepted as key components of the lexicon of defense transformation. But before the words become etched in stone, the Army and the other services should seriously think about what these terms mean for leaders, and their historical role in the American military experience. The colloquial caution, "Be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it," is worth pondering.

Words Matter

As any serious student of military history knows, truly innovative ideas usually come from staffs and subordinates. Leaders, especially at higher levels, rarely need to be innovative themselves; instead, they must be prepared to recognize valuable contributions from others and incorporate them into the practices of the larger organization. Timothy Lupfer's seminal study on the evolution of German tactical doctrine in World War I describes how senior German leaders incorporated the best ideas from staff officers and junior leaders throughout the army (and from the French) to develop doctrines and practices for elastic defense-in-depth and new offensive tactics that provided the basis for later *blitzkrieg*.[3]

In contrast, American leaders in Vietnam often actively resisted initiatives for improvement proposed by subordinates. John Nagl's insightful study of counterinsurgency lessons from the war in Southeast Asia concludes that "the US Army generals who commanded MAAG-V [Military Assistance

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Advisory Group-Vietnam] and MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] repeatedly rejected innovative suggestions for changes in American counterinsurgency doctrine in Vietnam." He concludes that these senior leaders were very capable professionals, but their experience and organizational culture limited their vision. Nagl contrasts that example with the British Army in Malaya, which adapted much more readily to unfamiliar conditions and quickly embraced new ideas.[4]

There are plenty of examples of American military leaders before Vietnam who appreciated the contributions that innovative subordinates and staffs had to offer, especially in World War II. Army Air Forces Commanding General Henry "Hap" Arnold organized an advisory council of three to five young staff officers, "the brightest I could get," and set them up in an office close to his. His instructions to them were straightforward: "What I want you to do is sit down and think. Think of the problems confronting us. Think of the solutions to those problems. Bring in new ideas. If you bring in one idea every two or three days, I will be satisfied."[5]

A well-known example of American wartime innovation is the development and application of the "Rhinoceros" or "Rhino" hedgerow buster. This was typical of the process of decentralized adaptation that made the American Army in Europe so successful in World War II. The brainstorm of Sergeant Curtis G. Culin, Jr., of the 102d Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron in July 1944, the device consisted of prongs fashioned from a German roadblock that allowed a Sherman tank to force its way through a hedgerow without having to expose its vulnerable underbelly. Fifth Corps commander Major General Leonard Gerow recognized the Rhino's significant potential, and he invited General Omar Bradley to view a demonstration. The First Army commander was so impressed that he instructed his ordnance chief to comb England for arc welding equipment and to mass-produce the devices from beach obstacles. By the time of the great Operation Cobra attack in late July, 60 percent of American tanks were equipped with Rhinos. To ensure surprise, none of those Shermans were allowed to go into action before Cobra. Once the attack began, German armor was restricted to the roads, while the Americans flanked them through the hedgerows. The tactical and psycholog-

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ical impact of Sergeant Culin's innovation, exploited by Omar Bradley, was a major factor in the breakout from Normandy.[6]

Boldness in an organization, however, must be created by the leadership, beginning at the top. The Army War College recently adopted that characteristic as one of the key traits desirable in senior leaders. Most doctrinal proclamations of the advantages of bold leadership remain vague about the adjective's specific definition, however, and such a disconnect is worth examining. The copy of Webster's *New World Dictionary* on my shelf opens its description of "bold" as "daring, fearless." Cross referencing to "daring" gives us "having or showing a bold willingness to take risks."[7] So by definition, bold leaders are big risk-takers.

There are many reasons why senior American military leaders have rarely been bold. Those commanders with a preponderance of resources are less likely to feel obligated to take risks than perceived underdogs. Operating within a coalition also can restrict options. But conservative senior leadership has been very successful for the United States, and it avoids the significant costs and pitfalls that can result from operational and strategic gambles gone wrong. American leaders at high levels appear to have realized an important insight from military history that comes true more often than not: Bold leaders end badly.

America's Bold Generals

This analysis is primarily focused at the higher levels of combat leadership. Consequently, for the purposes of this article, all American generals were examined who led in combat at army level and above during the major wars of the 20th century.

In World War I, the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) were led by John J. Pershing. He also served as commander of First Army until turning over that position to Hunter Liggett in October 1918. During that same month, Pershing created Second Army and gave it to Robert L. Bullard. This new leadership structure finished the Meuse-Argonne campaign. Pershing eventually established a Third Army also, but only for occupation duties after the Armistice.

One of the brigade commanders in the AEF rose to become the supreme commander of Allied forces in the Southwest Pacific area in World War II, Douglas MacArthur. Under him, Walter Krueger commanded Sixth Army, and Robert L. Eichelberger led Eighth Army. One other army, the Tenth, saw action in the Pacific theater, where its commander, Simon Bolivar Buckner, was killed on the island of Okinawa.

The supreme commander of Allied Expeditionary Forces in the European Theater was Dwight D. Eisenhower. His senior American ground commander in Northwest Europe was Omar Bradley, who commanded First Army before advancing to lead Twelfth Army Group. Jacob Devers com-

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manded Sixth Army Group. Courtney Hodges commanded First Army, George Patton the Third and Seventh, Lucian Truscott the Fifth, Alexander Patch the Seventh, William Simpson the Ninth, and Leonard Gerow the Fifteenth. Mark Clark commanded Fifth Army before rising to take over Fifteenth Army Group in Italy.

Command climate can either engender or limit boldness, and Eisenhower has received criticism for being too conservative and restricting opportunities for audacity by his subordinates in the European theater. British sources especially have claimed he should have taken more military risks for a quicker victory or greater political gain. Such criticism at the time was often motivated by nationalistic sensitivities about Bernard Montgomery's status or the British role in the coalition, and later by hindsight about the future Cold War. Eisenhower's biographer grandson concedes that the general "intended to proceed methodically, not boldly."[8] But it is difficult to argue with success. His conservative approach was based on a careful evaluation of many factors often explained in great detail in his memoirs.[9] Was Eisenhower the SHAEF commander sometimes too cautious? Probably. Was he also very successful? Definitely.

Douglas MacArthur again headed a combined force in the Korean War, serving as commander of UN Forces and Far East Command. When MacArthur was relieved in April 1951, Matthew Ridgway took his place. Ridgway had been leading Eighth Army after the death of Walton Walker in December 1950. Ridgway's successor in that post was James Van Fleet. Their limited, controlled offensives regained the initiative and drove back the Chinese.[10] By the time the armistice was signed in 1953, Mark Clark was the theater commander, and Eighth Army was commanded by Maxwell Taylor.

There were only a handful of senior American combat leaders in the 20th century after Korea. William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams led the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam. Norman Schwarzkopf commanded the Coalition forces that liberated Kuwait in 1991, while John Yeosock was in charge of the subordinate Third Army in that campaign.

Of those 25 individuals, only two, John J. Pershing and Douglas MacArthur, fit the dictionary definition of boldness. (More discussion of George Patton will come later.) And both ended their combat careers badly.

At the senior level, Pershing's boldness first manifested itself during the Punitive Expedition into Mexico chasing Pancho Villa. He employed new technology such as motorcars and airplanes while sending "flying columns" deep into Mexico and ignoring normal tactical deployments. Historians generally have depicted the mission as a failure, but more objective military analysts have pointed out that Pershing did disperse Villa's bands and eliminate that threat to the United States. Even such sympathetic observers have to admit, however, that Pershing's high-handed activities severely antagonized the Mexican government and brought the two countries to the brink of war. Almost all Mexicans, regardless of their sentiments about the ongoing revolution, were unified in their resentment of Pershing's expedition.[11]

The campaign in Mexico also helped prepare a cadre of officers for leadership in World War I, and probably encouraged Pershing's disdain for tactics he felt were responsible for stalemate on the Western Front. While Pershing has deservedly been praised for creating and maintaining an independent American Army, his operational record has received severe criticism. His training programs were ineffective and sometimes counterproductive, he ignored the hard lessons his Allies had learned in favor of a vague concept of "open warfare" that confused his subordinates and got many killed, and he continually demanded too much from inexperienced staffs forced to deal with complicated schemes of maneuver that would have challenged even a much more seasoned army. The final American campaign in the Meuse-Argonne featured broken-down logistics that produced sick and hungry troops along with immense transportation logjams, and inept tactics that achieved any success strictly by "smothering German machine guns with American flesh." Despite gratuitous comments from Allies after the war about doughboy bravery, foreign leaders still considered the American Expeditionary Forces poorly organized and ignorant of modern warfare. Pershing had failed to produce an instrument of policy capable of strengthening Woodrow Wilson's leverage at the peace talks.[12]

One of Pershing's more talented subordinates in France was Douglas MacArthur, and the two would have a rocky relationship until the latter rose to become Chief of Staff of the Army in the 1930s. Even as a brigadier general in the trenches, MacArthur took great personal risks, earning seven Silver Stars and the Distinguished Service Cross with oak leaf cluster. When he achieved theater-level command in World War II, he proved equally willing to take risks at the operational level of war. Edward Drea's superb study of MacArthur's use of ULTRA intelligence reveals that the general continually

ignored any evidence that went against his preconceived strategic vision. The historian expected to find that generalship in the Pacific theater was influenced by the same "ULTRA state of mind" as in European operations, but instead bold MacArthur decisions such as those regarding Biak, Leyte, and Kyushu seemed to be made in spite of intelligence reports. According to Drea, "A sense of destiny, not revelations from ULTRA, propelled MacArthur through the Southwest Pacific campaigns." Often MacArthur's instincts were right, but at other times he benefited from Japanese ineptitude or fortuitous moves from Central Pacific forces that drew the enemy away. Yet his risk-taking always seemed to pay off. He tried to foster a similar attitude in his senior ground commanders, but was disappointed that Robert Eichelberger and Walter Krueger always seemed too cautious.[13]

MacArthur established a command climate to encourage audacity in his subordinates, but that could not motivate his army commanders to become daring risk-takers. In fairness to Eisenhower, his subordinates in Europe probably would have similarly remained cautious even if Eisenhower's nature had tended more toward boldness. Though Krueger and Eichelberger did not meet MacArthur's expectations in that regard, they still must be considered very successful leaders.[14]

MacArthur continued his bold ways in Korea in 1950. Inchon was his masterpiece, though it can be argued the September operation was actually too surprisingly successful, since it forced hasty strategic decisions from unprepared policymakers in Washington and Beijing. But the dark side of boldness was less than three months away, at Kunu-ri and Chosin Reservoir. By early November, MacArthur's intelligence staff was estimating Chinese strength in Manchuria at 868,000. Denied accurate aerial reconnaissance by the intervention of Soviet-piloted MiG-15s, MacArthur still drove his divided forces toward the Yalu River. Seizing upon the promises of his Far East Air Forces (FEAF) to create a zone of destruction in North Korea to block Chinese entry, he cabled Washington on 9 November that he was confident "unrestricted" airpower would provide security. He believed, or hoped, the Chinese would never intervene, anyway. But any fears about MacArthur's "over reliance" on airpower, and faith in his destiny, would prove well-founded.[15]

Though MacArthur was not satisfied with the boldness of his ground commanders in World War II, he got along very well with leaders of other components in the Southwest Pacific. George Kenney was an audacious air commander with MacArthur's own instincts for risk-taking. One reason MacArthur was so willing to accept unachievable FEAF promises in November 1950 was because he had gotten so used to Kenney's creative competence in World War II. MacArthur particularly enjoyed working with the aptly nicknamed William "Bull" Halsey, whom MacArthur considered "a real fighting admiral," very

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much like himself. There was no bolder naval commander in World War II than Halsey. His aggressive risk-taking helped win the key campaign at Guadalcanal that started the advance to Tokyo, though American naval losses totaled 24 capital ships. Even when successful, boldness can be costly.[16]

Halsey's last combat left a controversial cloud over his reputation. At the climactic and complicated naval Battle of Leyte Gulf, the Japanese purposefully designed a plan to exploit Halsey's bold nature. Luring his covering task force away with aircraft carriers virtually denuded of planes, the Japanese managed to get a battleship force into the staging area for MacArthur's Leyte landings. If not for the last-minute faintheartedness of Admiral Kurita, brought on by *kamikaze*-like attacks by small American escort vessels, the Japanese could have destroyed much of the landing force and extended the war. Historians still debate the degree of Halsey's culpability for the near-disaster, but the fact remains that his well-known penchant for boldness was exploited by a competent enemy.[17]

Good Examples, Wrongly Labeled

Many leaders touted as examples of boldness were really not daring risk-takers. A good example is George S. Patton, Jr. He was aggressive, and willing to take advantage of opportunities the situation presented, but as his leadership matured he also diligently pursued methods to mitigate risk. His dash across France is often portrayed as an illustration of audacious boldness, but in reality it was far different. Patton was an ardent student of ULTRA, exhibiting that "ULTRA state-of-mind" lacking in MacArthur, and he paid careful attention to all sources of intelligence. Patton's two tours as an intelligence officer prepared him well to integrate those assets into his operations. His Third Army G-2 (intelligence officer), Oscar Koch, always had the first say in any planning. Patton also fostered a very close relationship with O. P. Weyland and his XIXth Tactical Air Command, using their planes to clear the way for his tanks and to provide security. In addition, French Resistance fighters helped cover exposed flanks and conducted reconnaissance. Patton was not a gambler,

and he used superior information and mobility to avoid enemy strengths and exploit their weaknesses. He also appreciated the advantages that accurate friendly situational awareness provided, and he established his 6th Cavalry Group as the "Third Army Information Service." Liaison patrols throughout the area of operations provided a steady stream of tactical and operational data to Army Headquarters. Patton's reputation for having an uncanny sense of the battlefield was not a product of instinct or destiny, but instead resulted from the reports of his "Household Cavalry."[18]

Words like "bold" and "innovative" have become buzzwords to apply to any successful commander, but the historical record often presents a different portrayal. For instance, in October 2003 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld addressed units at Fort Carson, Colorado, extolling them to exhibit the same "bold, courageous, and innovative" traits of Christopher "Kit" Carson, for whom the post was named.[19] Though Carson's courage cannot be disputed, his conduct in his most senior commands was very conventional, and usually cautious. He commanded the First New Mexico Volunteer Regiment at the Battle of Valverde in February 1862, where Union forces under E. R. S. Canby tried to halt the advance of Henry Hopkins Sibley's Texans. Having watched the Second New Mexico get shattered in its first action the day before, Carson was careful to bring his own unit into combat slowly. When Canby deployed his forces to the battlefield, Carson requested to be put into a flank blocking position. There he allowed his green troops to watch the developing battle. When Canby mounted his main attack, the First New Mexico performed very steadily in the advance. When Union forces retreated, Carson's New Mexicans maintained good order, unlike the Second New Mexico, which again broke. As a reward for his steady leadership, Carson was brevetted as a brigadier general of volunteers in March.[20]

He soon raised another regiment, the First New Mexico Cavalry, and commanded it in campaigns against the Mescaleros, Navahos, Kiowas, and Comanches. Though Carson might have preferred to parley with the Indians and come to a peaceful agreement that way, he responded to the paternal prodding of his new commander James Carleton with the typical scorched-earth, overwhelming-force operations usually mounted to defeat belligerent Native Americans. Against the Navahos in 1863, for example, Carson persuaded friendly Utes to help him, kept a strong force of New Mexico volunteers in the field, and proceeded to destroy the Navaho villages, fields, and herds. By January 1864, most of the starving and bedraggled tribe had surrendered, without having fought a single major battle. Carson had no great battlefield success in any of his Indian campaigns, but he did wear his enemies down. His tactics and operations were very effective, but they were not really innovative, and they were definitely not bold.[21]

The Future of Boldness

The main argument of this article is that the US military does not need a culture that encourages daring risk-taking, especially at senior levels. We may already be paying a price in Iraq for this new emphasis on boldness. In a post-invasion meeting discussing the planning and force structure for reconstruction and stability operations, General Tommy Franks' first slide for his field commanders read, "Take as much risk coming out as you took going in." Such talk about accepting postwar risks alarmed retired Lieutenant General Jay Garner of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs, but it was too late for him to affect the course of events. The daring planning that helped bring swift success in major combat operations did not effectively deal with the aftermath, and contributed to the ongoing problems that continue to bedevil us in Iraq.[22]

In a television interview, defense analyst Andrew Krepinevich described the Army's transformation efforts focusing on lighter, more agile units, used in daring operations, as "Getting Custer to the Little Big Horn faster." There has been no military leader in American history bolder than George Armstrong Custer, and his fate emphasizes the common eventual cost of boldness. Arguing against this trait, which permeates current transformation doctrine, is not just an exercise in semantics. This is not a problem that the military can just redefine away. There are already accepted meanings of "boldness," and its emphasis encourages a mindset that accepts high risks for the potential of great gain. But this mindset too often neglects to consider the downside of such actions, and that eventually the odds catch up with daring commanders. And one wonders how our society, or military, would respond to a modern Little Big Horn.

George Patton remains a fine role model for future leaders. Instead of promoting boldness, we should be advocating the aggressive exploitation of opportunities, with due concern to mitigate risks. The US military still does not do well with systematic risk assessment, as was revealed in Iraq, and this is a fertile field for future research and doctrine development. Commanders must also encourage innovation throughout their organizations and be prepared to recognize and reward the ideas of subordinates, to create the same atmosphere of decentralized adaptation that was so successful for the American Army in World War II. As the Commander of the US Army Training and Doctrine Command, General William Wallace, is fond of saying, "No one of us is smarter than all of us together."

In the end, there is no substitute for decisionmaking based on a thorough evaluation of intelligence, comprehensive situational awareness, and sound judgment. Destiny is not a method.

NOTES

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2. US Department of the Army, *Training the Force*, Field Manual 7.0 (Washington: GPO, October 2002), p. 1-5.

3. Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute, July 1981).

4. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 192-204.

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9. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Books, 1948).

10. For a description and explanation of Matthew Ridgway's conservative generalship in Korea, see his book *The Korean War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986).

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13. Geoffrey Perret, *Old Soldiers Never Die: The Life of Douglas MacArthur* (New York: Random House, 1996), pp. 108-10, 392-93; Edward J. Drea, *MacArthur's Ultra: Codebreaking and the War against Japan, 1942-1945* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1992), pp. 228-35.

14. Krueger still deserves a good biography, but for Eichelberger see John F. Shortal, *Forged By Fire: General Robert L. Eichelberger and the Pacific War* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1987).

15. Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2000), pp. 46-55.

16. Perret, pp. 340-42, 349-50; Samuel Eliot Morrison, *The Two Ocean War* (New York: Ballantine, 1974), pp. 139-78.

17. There are many excellent accounts of the Battle of Leyte Gulf; for example, see Thomas J. Cutler, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf, 23-26 October 1944* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

18. Bradford J. Schwedo, *XIX Tactical Air Command and ULTRA: Patton's Force Enhancers in the 1944 Campaign in France* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Univ. Press, May 2001); Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 637-38; Gary B. Griffin, *The Directed Telescope: A Traditional Element of Effective Command* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute, July 1991), pp. 26-27; Ladislas Farago, *Patton: Ordeal and Triumph* (New York: Obolensky, 1964), p. 493.

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21. Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), pp. 234-37, 237-45, 297-99; Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), pp. 20-28.

22. John Barry and Evan Thomas, "The Unbuilding of Iraq," *Newsweek*, 6 October 2003, p. 36; Michael Gordon, "The Strategy to Secure Iraq Did Not Foresee a 2nd War: Catastrophic Success—First of Three Articles: Then the Insurgency," *The New York Times*, 19 October 2004, p. A1. The author interviewed a CENTCOM staff officer who attended the briefing by General Franks and remembered that slide about risk.